



Management Assistance Program

COMMUNICATING WITH EMPLOYEES DURING A CRISIS:

How to prepare and help employees cope with a workplace related crisis

GOALS:

The goal of this module is to provide organizations, managers and employees with the knowledge and tools necessary to prepare and cope effectively with a crisis. The underlying goal is to help managers learn how to respond to the emotional needs of employees both during and after a crisis to reduce the negative impact of critical incidents on workplace morale and productivity.

The specific goals are to help organizations, managers, and employees:

- Learn how to prepare for a crisis.
- Obtain some tips on what to do during a crisis.
- Understand how to help employees after a crisis.
- Recognize the importance of being prepared for both large and small critical incidents.

OVERVIEW:

A crisis is any sudden or unexpected traumatic event that affects people's emotional lives, feelings of safety, and ability to cope. It might be a robbery or assault that occurred in the workplace, a sudden accident or death at work or off the worksite but still affecting a member of the organization. It may even be an incident that is happening on the world or national stage that affects the overall sense of well-being for individuals in the organization.

Floods, fires, hurricanes, airplane crashes, and acts of terrorism are other examples of critical incidents that may occur outside of the job that significantly impact a large number of staff. Whatever the trauma, staff may be affected for days, weeks, or even months afterwards and their effectiveness and daily productivity may slowly decline.

It is important for organizations, specifically managers, to have a plan to help their employees prior to, during, and even after a crisis. If management fails to respond to the emotional needs of employees after a tragedy, the result may be strained relations. When survivors feel cared about by management, such strains rarely develop.¹

OBJECTIVES:

1. How to prepare for a crisis

Managers should be prepared for a tragedy before it happens. There is a tendency to avoid thinking about something tragic but a certain degree of denial such as the thought “it couldn’t happen here”, must be overcome, and the worst case scenario must be anticipated.² Having a sound crisis intervention plan established in the workplace can go a long way toward preventing higher levels of reaction and moving those stress-affected individuals, groups and organizational divisions toward more immediate recovery. Implementing and practicing crisis management strategies can also effectively minimize the physical and psychological effects of trauma, which can help accelerate the transition back to normalized work routines with enhanced and renewed health and productivity.³

Here are some ways to prepare for a crisis:

- Form a crisis management team composed of managers, an in-house or outside legal consultant, human resources, security, and representatives from a local counseling group or the organization’s employee assistance program.
- Develop a crisis management plan, send it to all employees, and keep a copy on file for employees and management to reference at any time. This will help ensure that all staff are on the same page.
- Organize crisis drills, and work through possible case scenarios where employees have to think through how they would react in the event of a crisis or threat.
- Create a document containing crisis resources for staff members. The resources should include emergency telephone numbers, crisis counseling services, and/or employee assistance program information.

¹ Gardner, Rick, Bruce Blythe. “Survivors of tragedy need onsite help.” National Underwriter. 12 Apr 1999. Vol. 103, Iss. 15, p. 24-25.

² Gardner, Rick, Bruce Blythe.

³ Edelman, Andy. “8 Ways to Prepare Employees for a Crisis.” Security Solutions.com. 8 July 2006. Accessed at: http://securitysolutions.com/mag/security_ways_prepare_employees/

Even with the best preparation, no one is ever truly thoroughly prepared for the effects of a critical incident. If employees are exceptionally skilled at handling crisis situations or resilient enough to remain calm when one occurs, they can respond without a significant impact on their physical or emotional well-being.⁴

2. What to do during a crisis

How management copes with a crisis and the resulting traumatized employees is crucial—particularly in the first minutes, hours and days. It can make the difference between employees who recover and return to normal productivity with an enhanced loyalty to the company, and employees who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and do not recover.⁵

Depending on the situation, the crisis management team should focus on directing employees to a centralized and safe location; keeping employees away from distressing sights; and contacting the necessary emergency services. The managers should remain calm and professionally handle the situation to the best of their ability which may mean simply evacuating the employees from harms way. When employees panic they will often look to their leaders for guidance.⁶

Managers and supervisors should also attempt to identify and locate "at-risk" employees who were most directly affected by the incident immediately after a tragedy. It is important to make every effort to identify and get appropriate assistance for those most deeply impacted.⁷ Managers should never assume that all employees are (or should be) highly affected by the events. Those "at risk" will usually self-identify themselves or show ongoing lingering signs of emotional or cognitive problems which generally last for weeks. Initial emotions and obsessive thoughts about the recent events are usually normal during the first couple of days or weeks after the crisis.

Communication is never as important for organizations or individuals as it is during a crisis. Employees are in need of accurate and reliable information, especially from management. Good communication reduces uncertainty and harmful rumors, and can help employees reduce their fear, anxiety, and feelings of being out of control. The American Psychological Association recommends that employers:⁸

⁴ Edelman, Andy.

⁵ Gardner, Rick, Bruce Blythe.

⁶ Gardner, Rick, Bruce Blythe.

⁷ Knowles, Robert G. "Post-disaster debriefing fights stress: Expert." National Underwriter. 14 Feb 1994. Vol. 98, Iss. 7, p. 13.

⁸ "Responses to Workplace Violence Post 9/11: What Can Organizations Do?" American Psychological Association. Accessed: 20 August 2007 at <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/post911work.html>.

- Foster an atmosphere in which two-way communication is valued.
- Provide frequent, full, specific and up-to-date information regarding the crisis.
- Encourage employees to approach management to ask questions, share concerns and information, and offer suggestions and solutions, by establishing both formal structures and processes to facilitate on-going communication, as well as opportunities for informal communication.
- Use multiple communication channels, regular staff meetings, email updates, telephone trees, internal websites and one-on-one discussions with a private counselor if more dialogue is needed.
 - Provide employees with a number of resources through corporate e-mails, Intranet, newsletters, 1-800 call centers, and various employee assistance programs (EAP) to cope with tragic events.

3. What to do after a crisis

In addition to helping employees during a crisis, managers should be prepared to help employees cope with the aftermath of the crisis. According to Bruce Blythe, President and CEO of Crisis Management International, it is important to remember that people suffering from a traumatic stress reaction don't need isolation; they need structure, assurance, peer support, facts and information. They need to know that what they are experiencing—nightmares, flashbacks, sleeplessness or physical symptoms—are normal. Other people are probably having the same reactions.

Managers should: ⁹

- Attend to the needs of employees before dealing with the business implications. Taking immediate action to help overwhelmed employees cope with their feelings after a tragedy is integral to employee recovery, which must be considered prior the bottom line.
- Consider recommending that employees come back to work to attend employee briefing meetings instead of taking time off. Some organizations assume that giving employees a day off is the kindest thing they can do—but survivors often experience flashbacks, sleeplessness and extreme anxiety. These symptoms can be heightened if they are home by themselves.
- For those employees who were already emotionally vulnerable because of a recent personal trauma (such as a death in the family) when the incident occurred, added off-site psychological assistance may be needed.

⁹ Gardner, Rick, Bruce Blythe.

- Focus on re-framing the negative event into positive opportunities. Remind the staff that they made it through a tough time, and commend personnel for their courage. Try to normalize the environment and enhance team-building activities during this sensitive time. Encourage staff to focus on friends and family.¹⁰

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

It is important for managers to understand that some employees may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is the psychological effect of exposure to an extreme traumatic event either by directly experiencing an actual or threatened serious injury or death or by learning about such an event happening to a family member, friend, or close associate.

Some common indicators of PTSD are:

- Recurrence or flashback of the event for at least one month or longer.
- Avoidance of situations that are reminders of the traumatic event.
- Sleep disruption.
- Anxiety and irritability.
- Significant social, occupational, or other distress.

Observe employees behavior after the crisis, and assist those who believe they are suffering from PTSD by getting them proper psychological or medical help.

Support

Work-related support limits the consequences of exposure to work-related stress.

Research shows that a supportive work environment enhances health and well-being, especially during times of a crisis. Employees can support each other by listening to people's concern and fears about themselves and their loved ones, recognizing unique individual needs for recovery from unusually demanding tasks, or providing for practical needs such as food and transportation. Being flexible about how and when work gets accomplished also helps create a supportive atmosphere.¹¹

Providing professional mental health counseling from a qualified professional

¹⁰ Edelman, Andy.

¹¹ American Psychological Association.

should also be made available and encouraged, but should not be made mandatory.¹²

4. Recognize that a work-related crisis can be other than a major tragedy

It is important to realize that not all crises are tragedies. A crisis can occur if the CEO of a company dies, a merger takes place and many employees lose their jobs, or if an employee crucial to the organization decides to leave. These incidents should be addressed and handled carefully as well.

For instance, during a merger and acquisition there may be a substantial amount of layoffs. As a manager, it is important to invest time and energy into the “disengaged” as well as the “survivors”. This will help produce compassion, aid recovery, and fuel productivity and boost morale. Managers must recognize that the people who leave as well as those who remain are experiencing the loss of their coworkers, and need time to cope with their feelings of anger, sadness and denial. Those who leave may feel rejected while those who remain may endure “survivor guilt” where they feel guilty that they have been chosen to remain after the downsizing effort.¹³

Overall, no matter what type of crisis occurs, managers must realize the impact of critical events on employees, families, and the community—and—take the appropriate steps to help employees cope and recover from the crisis as best as possible.

¹² American Psychological Association.

¹³ Heathfield, Susan. “Downsizing Survivors: Motivating Employees Who Remain after Layoffs”. [About.com](http://humanresources.about.com/od/layoffsdownsizing/a/downsizing2.htm). Accessed 20 August 2007 at <http://humanresources.about.com/od/layoffsdownsizing/a/downsizing2.htm>

SUMMARY: Tips for Communicating with Employees During a Crisis

- Management must strive to provide resources to meet the emotional and psychological needs of employees during a crisis.
- It is important for management to create a crisis management plan so all staff are better equipped to handle critical incidents.
- Crisis drills and other crisis management strategies should be practiced and discussed with staff prior to major incidents to prepare staff to respond affectively.
- It is crucial for managers and leaders to provide frequent, full, specific, and up-to-date information during a crisis.
- Use multiple communication channels such as, staff meetings, emails, telephone trees, internal websites and one-on-one discussions to keep employees informed.
- After a crisis, encourage employees to approach management to ask questions, share concerns and information, and offer suggestions and solutions.
- Be aware that some employees may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and may need to be referred for professional assistance.
- Consider returning employees back to work or a centralized location instead of sending them home immediately after the tragedy.
- Encourage a supportive work environment for a period of time after a crisis to enhance health and well-being among employees.
- Remember, not every crisis is a tragedy—managers should make sure they are prepared for all types of critical incidents.